

# Robert Cumming





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Cover: (detail) *The Portion of the Corcoran Steps  
Not Sunk Beneath the Sidewalk*

The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976

Robert Cumming

FEBRUARY 14—MAY 9, 1976

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THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C.

*The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976* is an unprecedented Bicentennial project originated by The Corcoran Gallery of Art. Eight eminent American photographers have been invited to spend extended periods—at least a month—in Washington, D.C. during 1975-76 to photograph the city, its environs and people, as each was guided by his own vision. Thus we hoped to achieve a diversified documentation of a place and time. A selection of four prints by each artist is to be earmarked for exhibition at the Corcoran in the Tricentennial year 2076.

The participating artists, each shown separately, two at a time in four stages throughout the year 1976, are LEWIS BALTZ, San Francisco; JOE CAMERON, Washington, D.C.; ROBERT CUMMING, Los Angeles; ROY DECARAVA, New York City; LEE FRIEDLANDER, New City, New York; JOHN GOSSAGE, Washington, D.C.; JAN GROOVER, New York City; and ANTHONY HERNANDEZ, Los Angeles.

The artists were selected by Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin. As organizers of this series of exhibitions they have been responsible for the complete task of scheduling and working with the artists at every stage of the project's long development, and for producing the eight catalogues. I wish to express my special appreciation to them and to each of the eight artists for their unstinting cooperation.

The exhibition is supported by grants from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Washington, D.C., and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.

ROY SLADE  
*Director*

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ROBERT CUMMING, it should first be said, is a photographer only by expedient. His conceptual, verbal and visual inventiveness place both his subject and his technique at several removes from "a priori reality"—and in this Cumming differs importantly from the other artists participating in "The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976." Being invited to visit Washington for a month to make a series of (primarily) photographic works, Cumming was by no means expected to go out into the streets and record what was adventitiously given. His way of receiving and organizing information that is indigenous to a place is, rather, filtered through the artist's own very recognizable, often eccentric system of layering meanings, references and pictures into sometimes obscure and yet paradoxically explicit images. Perhaps only because he is—and cannot help but be—an acutely sensitive reflector of his environment, the photographs produced do, however, carry in them a mysteriously legible and revealing aura of the *locale* in which they came to exist.

The experience of being transplanted for a month into a strange location seemed for Cumming to elicit a peculiarly intense and sustained interval of activity. Not only did he produce a large body of photos, but he made a number of what can only be called sculptural objects as well. A seemingly artless, even toy-like, quality inheres in the handmade props, such as the box fabricated of patterned paper, like wallpaper, to simulate (but in three dimensions) the shape of the city of Baltimore as it looks on a map. (The box as it appears here is actually the second he laboriously crafted—the first was mistakenly crumpled up and put in a wastebasket by someone straightening up after hours.) This character of playfulness, of miniaturization, felt too in the small wooden boat carrying a flashlight, has the effect of calling into consciousness the *scale* itself of the real monumental objects Cumming takes for his subject in other works. The Washington Monument, for instance, is seen at close range only in its lower one-third, rather than being in a sense miniaturized as is usually done by photographing it from a distance. In one work Cumming

creates an elaborate, punning comment on statuarial scale specifically, photographing his own hand in various juxtapositions to the relatively huge hand of the war memorial on the Ellipse.

Cumming's ability to quickly verbalize comparative attributes, and to easily translate this verbal insight into visual form is demonstrated in his various comments about the relative weight and solidity of Washington in the American context. In late October, he found himself in Las Vegas and wrote on the back of an MGM Grand Hotel keno form, "... getting the pithy juices flowing once again with flashes of environmental inspiration amongst the glitter and glow and mirror and false facade-ish aura in the gemstone of the Mojave mother-lode. . . . Las Vegas gives me a lot of insight into Graecian themes and their applications." Working in the temporarily uninhabited basement photo labs at the Corcoran, Cumming had used Gallery art works, among them, Sanford Gifford's *Ruins of the Parthenon*, as a point of departure for works referring to larger Washington and then, as we see, to the nation, or to an idea in a larger sense. What finally occurs in viewing the body of work, which takes the form of a series of typically crisp, sharply detailed photographs and a number of carefully handmade sculptures used as props, is an apprehension of several underlying ideas developed in response not only to a city but to an *idea* of a city, and altered by a more personal idea formed in a specific institution—the Corcoran Gallery.

Cumming deals with the Capital's physical and symbolic grandeur—its weight and largeness, its architectural character, its relation to human scale. He tends to refer back and forth from micro- to macrocosmic views of the situation—from himself to a confronted object; or from inside (e.g. a painting detail) to outside (its gallery); or from detail to whole. As in the artist's other work, we are required to study the comparisons offered, and often to solve a puzzle in order to apprehend the thinking behind the sometimes mysterious tableau-like images.

JANE LIVINGSTON



*Orange, Calif., September, 1975*

Dear Jane and Frances,

August was a fine month in Washington for work, if a bit sticky and hot. I thank the Corcoran staff for all the help in connecting several dozen loose ends encountered by me when I was there. When you first phoned me and outlined the project, I looked back on my first and only visit to the Nation's Capital back in 1970 (College Arts Conference that got me the job in Calif. that got me out of Wisconsin), and all I could remember was the scale of the vast public spaces and buildings and my personal sensation of horror at the wide-openness of the Mall (my fear of wide-openness first realized on the planar flatnesses of the Midwest). In my month, I seemed to have successfully, if unconsciously, bypassed that open emptiness on every count.

In the five years I've been in Calif. the spaces I've come to feel most comfortable in have shrunk from a ranging curiosity out in the deserts and mountains to an incredibly small sphere in and around my house/studio. It's too early to tell, but the works of the last three years have all the earmarks of a committed intimist without my overt awareness or pushing the point. It just happened. Large-scale works are always the first to be discarded due to lack of mobility: they don't ship easily and are first damaged in transit; they crowd my small spaces and are a financial drain. The only time I'll endeavor them is under commission, so when they're complete they're no longer underfoot. "Sentence Structures," commissioned in 1970 by the Walker Art Center, I look on as the largest and one of the most successful works of my career.

However, out of repetition or out of habit, I found myself working off of stimuli in and around my studio in the Corcoran basement. Terra Cognita. The last two weeks at the Swifts' house in Georgetown opened up a second smallish sphere or territory for the performance of pieces.

An apology: because of the indoor smallness and favoring of detail over environmental scope, many of the pieces could have been performed most anywhere in the country, were it not for a subtle coloring in the details that place them in Washington, D.C. Several works relate in a literal way rather than in an outwardly visual way to the city. Classical Greek-ish architectural detailing is everywhere and inescapable. Sculpture pedestals and everything down to ashtrays have a hard time not being Doric/Ionic/Corinthian. In Los Angeles the cultural spread is vast by comparison, from Tiki-moderne to Art Deco-ingenious to Spanish and Mediterranean and everything else in between, and a lot of times all together. In D.C., columns are real marble and granite; in Los Angeles, they're liable to be paint-on-stucco, plaster of Paris, or resin. A simple table in an out-of-the-way crit room in the Corcoran Art School's basement is a 300-lb. slab of marble. It figured in two works.

I've never done so much in a single month; in fact, about four times my normal production. I can seldom tell a really good work from the mediocre and downright bad till a month or two to a year later. We'll just have to wait and see how they all look in retrospect. Being primarily a conceptual artist sandwiched in between the support media of sculptural means and photographic ends, I'm supposed to have all that wonderful freedom of the "studio in your head," but it's become a lot more difficult than that. In August, props had to be built in an unfamiliar distant city that made foraging for supplies and the wherewithal to construct them, a labor. A lot of the time spent was wasted in clumsy unfamiliarity and general stumbling about trying to get things done. Aside from that, I'm bristling to see what it all looks like assembled for the show in February. My immediate reaction to the body of work is that of curiosity and spent adventure.

I swear to the Lord above that all the photos were done in Washington, D.C. in August of 1975.

ROBERT CUMMING

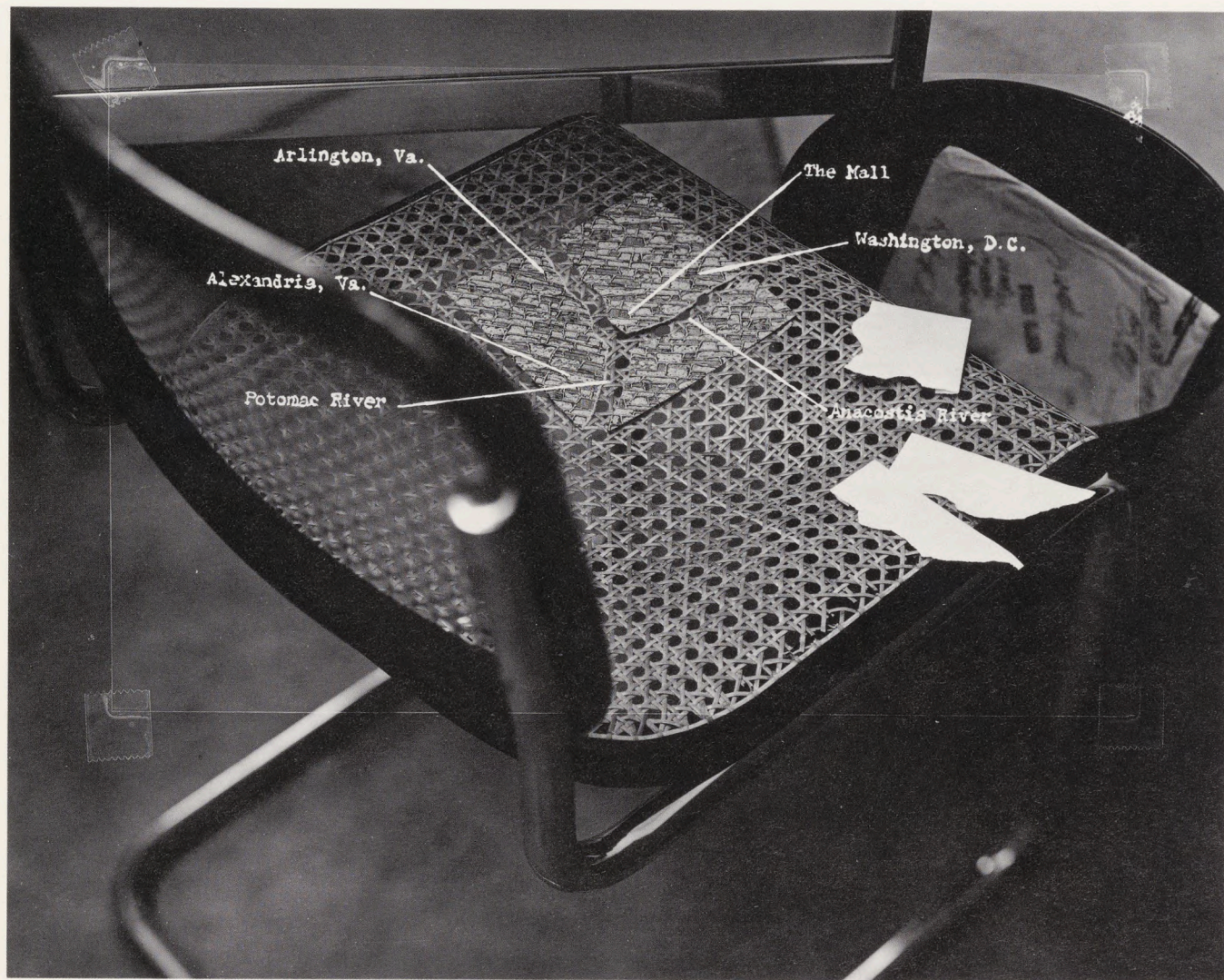


## Catalogue of the Exhibition

1. Cleaning the Sleeping Endymion's Flute, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
2. Details at the Foot of the Washington Monument  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
3. Washington and Baltimore are only about Thirty Miles Distant  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*  
Rough and Refined Washington/Baltimore Box  
*wood, paper, 18 x 22 x 5*
4. Light Boat Leaves Paths on Night Pool  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*  
Light Paths on Night Pool  
*four 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*  
Flashlight Boat  
*wood, string, flashlight, 8 x 18½ x 6*
5. Ring-bound Stationery; Sketch to Final State  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*  
Ring-bound Stationery  
*ten sheets paper: eight sheets each 8½ x 11; two sheets each 5 x 8*
6. John and Denise: Standing/Sweeping  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
7. Couch-like Objects: Fat-to-Lean  
*three 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
8. Artificial Bamboo Commissioned by the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C. (photographed in Georgetown)  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
9. Artificial Bamboo Chairs Appropriated by the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
10. Walking Shoes Turned Momentarily in Profile (Denise in Heels)  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
11. Distracted in Mid-Stride, Spike-Heeled Man Kneels to Read (John)  
*two 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*
12. Monument Fingernails, Washington, D.C.  
*three 8 x 10 photographs mounted on 20 x 30 board*  
Monument Fingernails  
*paper, photograph, ruler, acetate, wire, 36 x 24*
13. The Portion of the Corcoran Steps Not Sunk beneath the Sidewalk  
*8 x 10 photograph mounted on 11 x 14 board*  
The Portion of the Corcoran Steps Sunk beneath the Sidewalk  
*painted wood, 2½ x 43 x 5½*
14. Elaboration on a Detail from Sanford Gifford's "Ruins of the Parthenon," 1880, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
*five color photographs, each 3½ x 5, mounted on 16 x 20 board*  
Parthenon Ruins  
*cardboard on wood base, 5 x 7 x 24*
15. Two Idea Sheets, August 1975  
*paper mounted on 16 x 20 board*

■ All dimensions in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

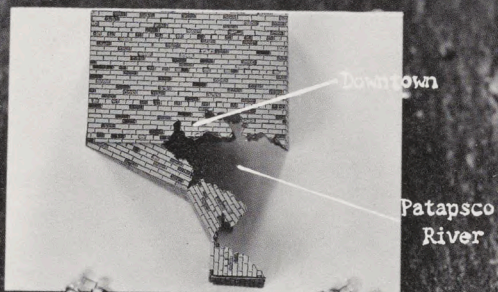




*Washington and Baltimore are only about Thirty Miles Distant*



Baltimore, Md.







*Details at the Foot of the Washington Monument*



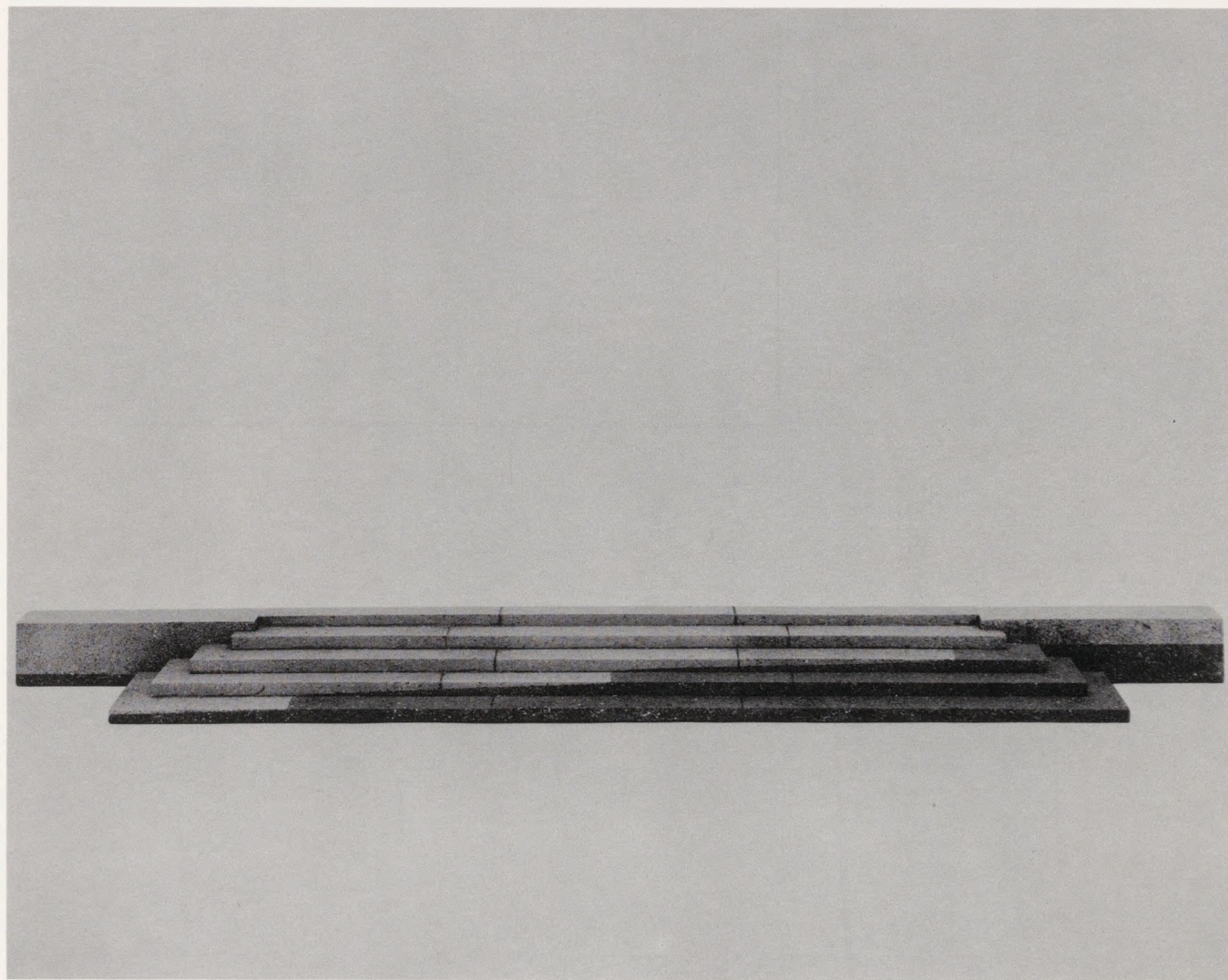






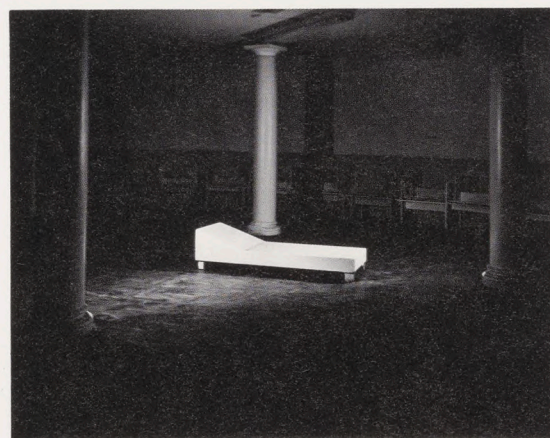
*The Portion of the Corcoran Steps Not Sunk Beneath the Sidewalk*





*Photograph by Paul Kennedy*





*Couch-like Objects:  
Fat-to-Lean*

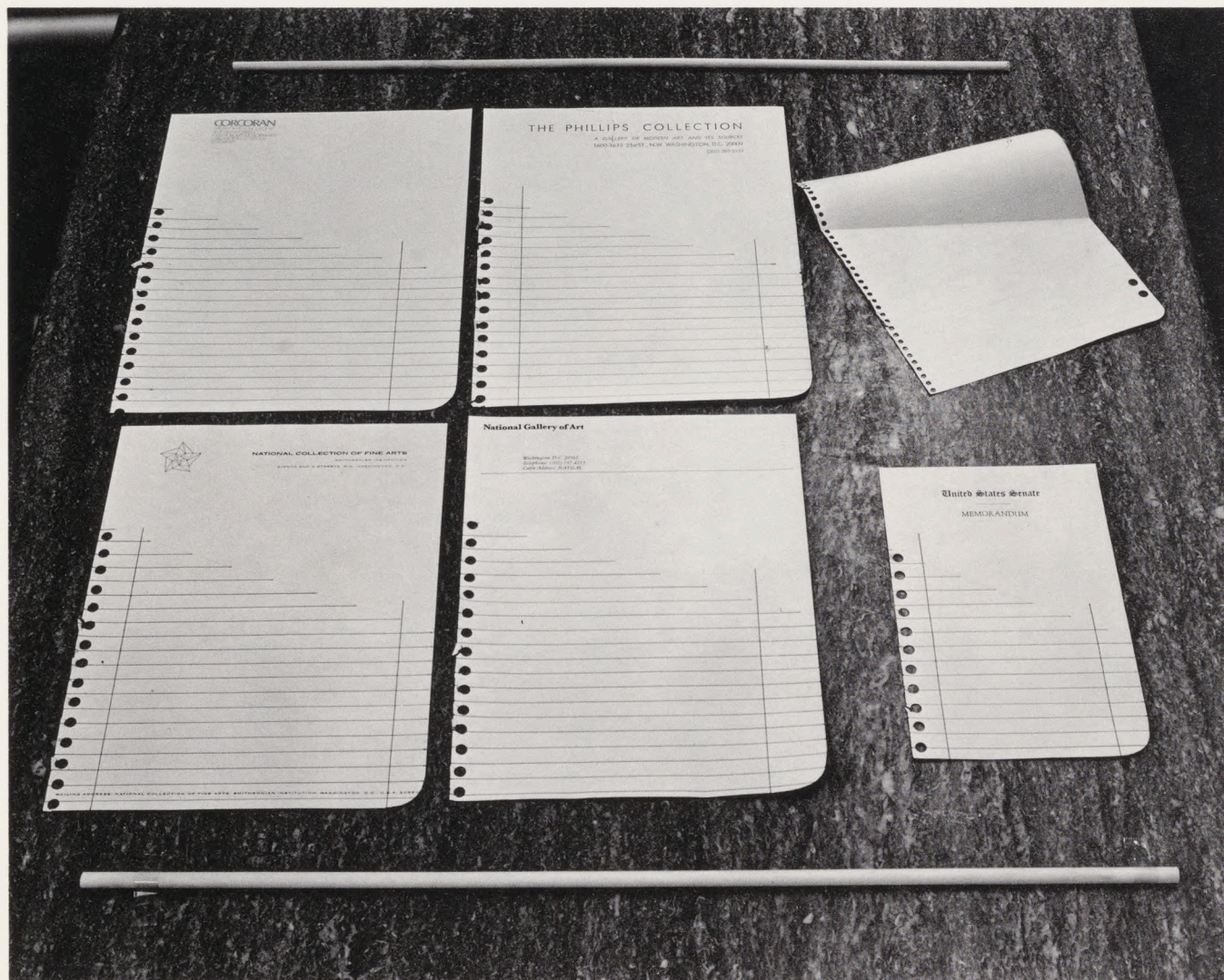


*Walking Shoes Turned Momentarily in Profile (Denise in Heels)*

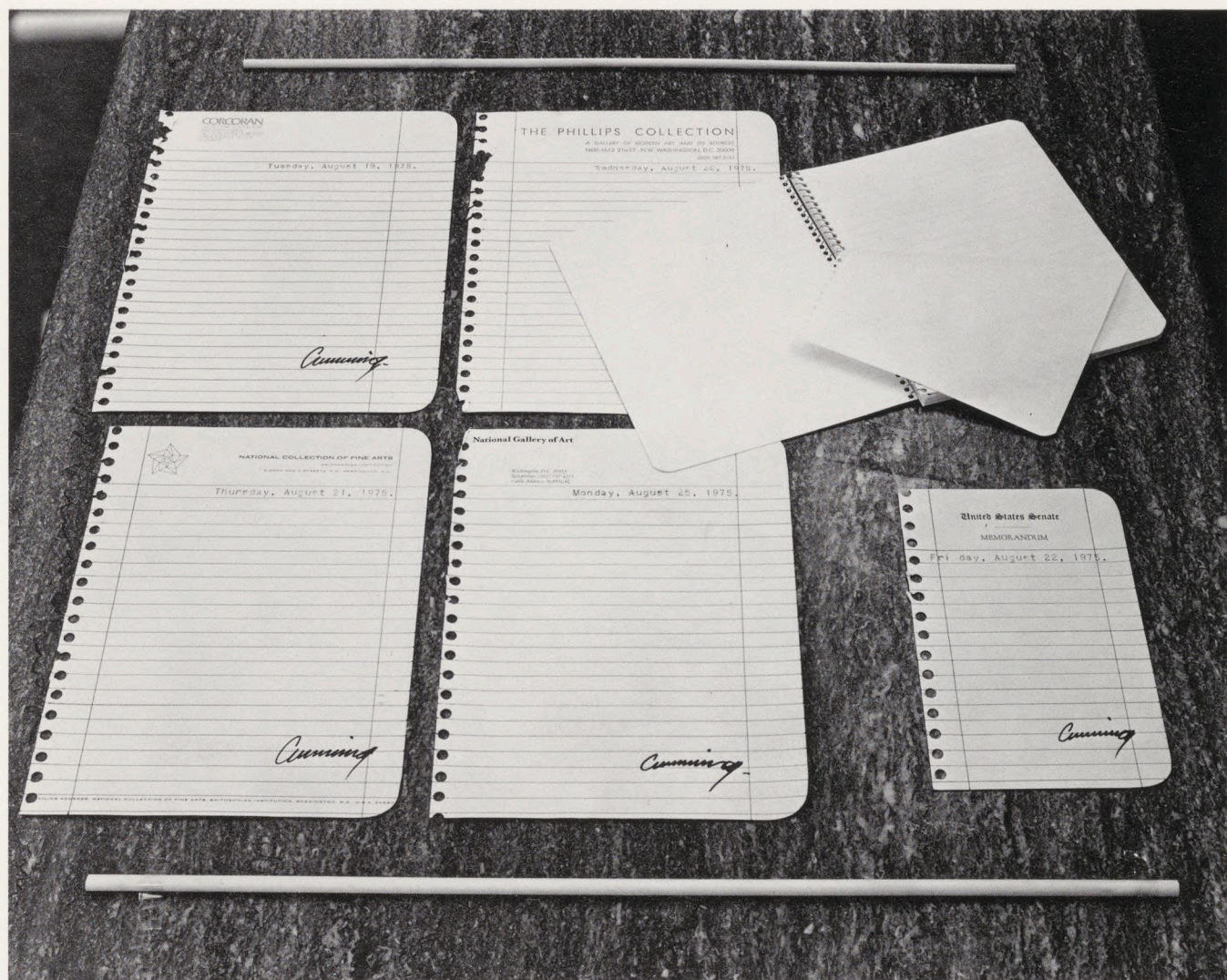


*Distracted in Mid-Stride, Spike-Heeled Man Kneels to Read (John)*











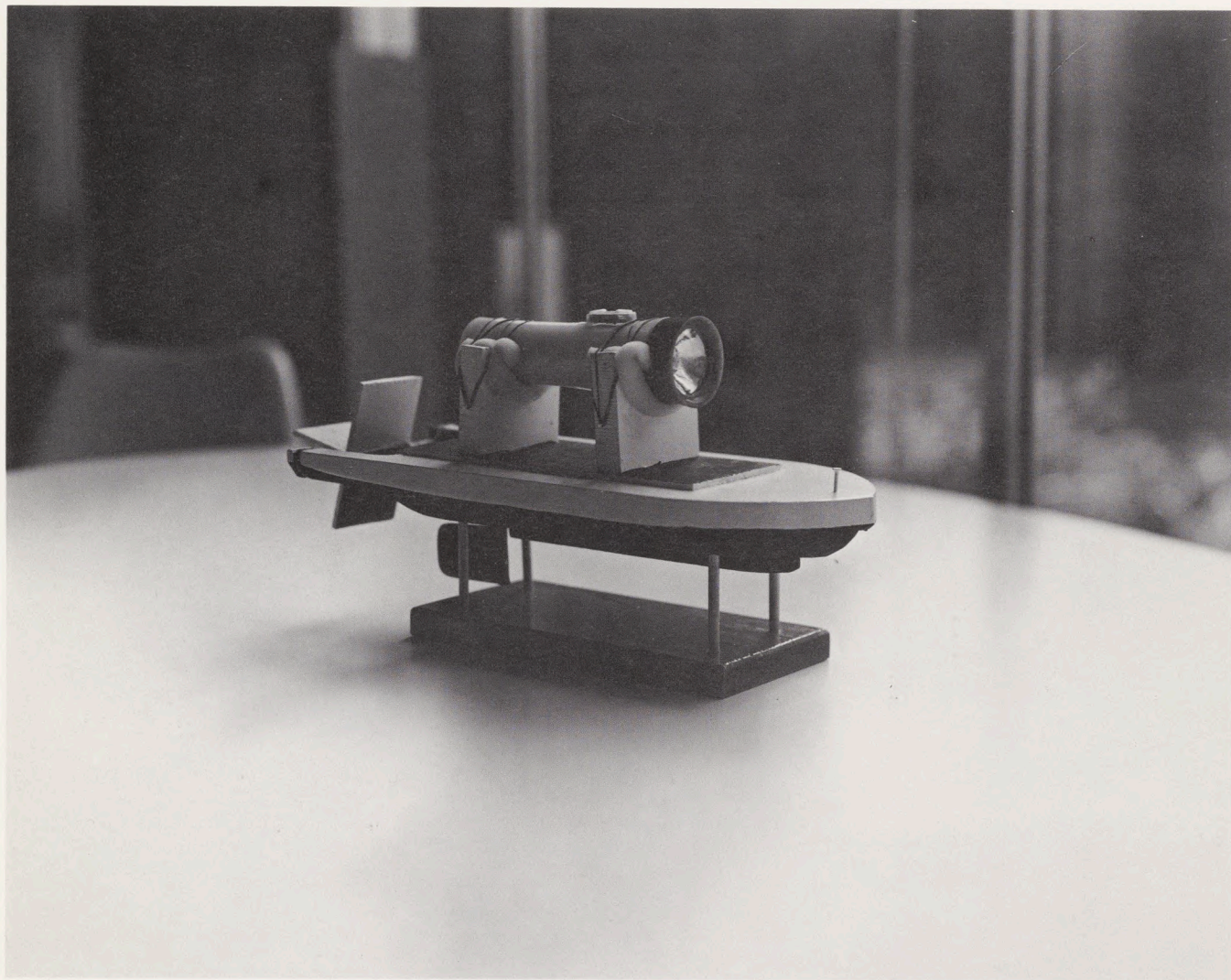


*Cleaning the Sleeping Endymion's Flute, Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.*



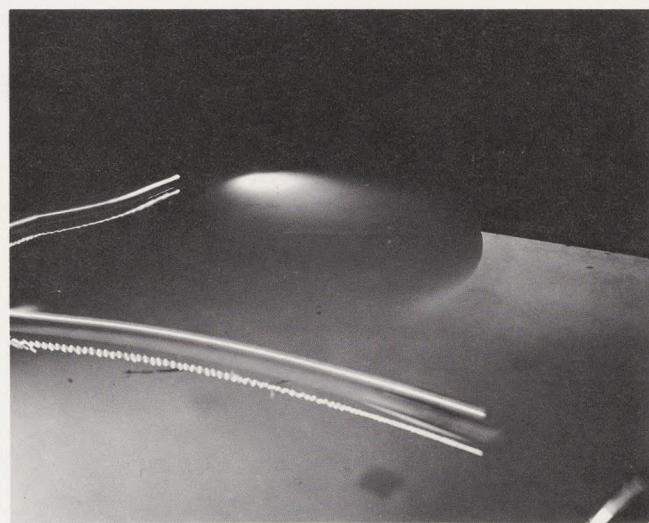
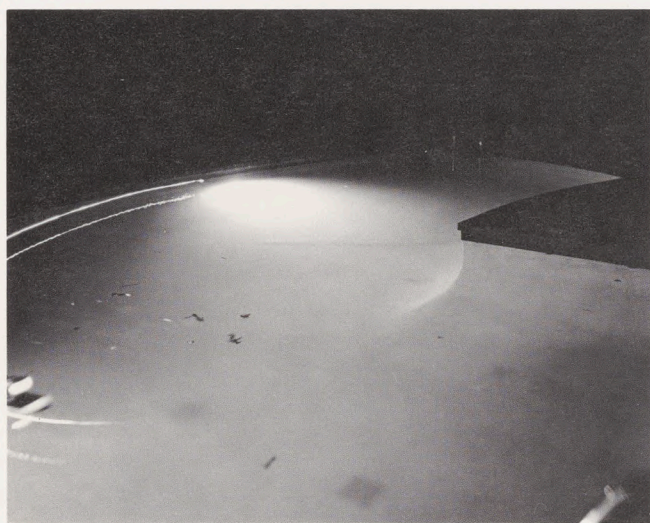




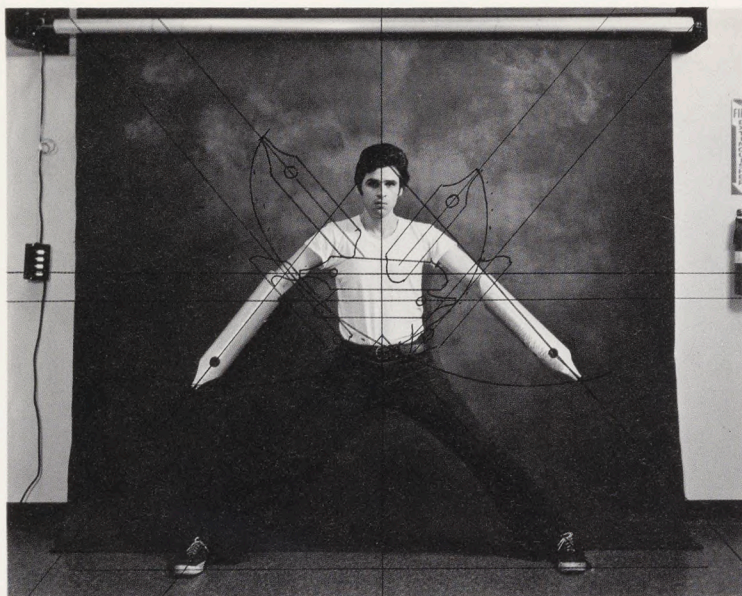


*Light Boat Leaves Paths on Night Pool*









## Robert Cumming

Born Worcester, Massachusetts, 1943.  
 B.F.A. Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 1965.  
 M.F.A. University of Illinois, Champaign, 1967.  
 Lives Orange, California.  
 Presently teaches Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles,  
 California; University of California at Los Angeles;  
 Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa.

## Solo Exhibitions

- 1973 Phoenix College, Phoenix, Arizona.  
 California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California.  
 John Gibson Gallery, New York City.  
 University of California at Irvine, Irvine, California.  
 1975 Verelst-Poirer Gallery, Brussels, Belgium.  
 John Gibson Gallery, New York City.  
 A Space Gallery, Toronto, Canada.

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1969 "Chicago and Vicinity," The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. Catalogue.  
 "Art by Telephone," Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Catalogue.  
 "Other Ideas," Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. Catalogue.  
 1970 "Art in the Mind," Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Catalogue.  
 "9 Artists/Spaces," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Catalogue.  
 1971 Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago.  
 "24 Young Los Angeles Artists," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.  
 Hundred Acres Gallery, New York City.  
 1972 "Books by Artists," Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California.  
 "Artists' Films," Montgomery Art Center, Pomona College, Claremont, California.  
 "New Art in Orange County," Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California.  
 1973 "Festival of Contemporary Art," Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Catalogue.  
 "Photo as Object, Metaphor, and Document of a Concept," California State College at Long Beach, Long Beach, California. Catalogue.  
 "Record as Artwork," Françoise Lambert Gallery, Milan, Italy.



1974 "Narrative Two," John Gibson Gallery, New York City.

Jack Glenn Gallery, San Diego, California.  
"14 American Photographers," Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. (Travels to Newport Harbor Art Museum, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and Fort Worth Art Museum.) Catalogue.

Cannaviello Gallery, Rome, Italy.

1974-75 Art Fair, Düsseldorf, Germany.

Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland.

Art Fair, Cologne, Germany.

1975 Livorno Museum, Livorno, Italy.

"Chair Show," Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada. Catalogue.

"Narrative Art," Palais Des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium. Catalogue.

"Aspects of Conceptual Art; a Documentation," Calcutta, India. Catalogue.

"Sequenced Photographs," University of Maryland Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. (Travels to San Francisco Museum of Art and University Art Museum, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.) Catalogue.

Jack Glenn Gallery, Newport Beach, California.

"Picture Puzzles," Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

"Wisconsin Directions," Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee. Catalogue.

"Word, Image, Number," Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York. Catalogue.

"Report from Soho," Gray Gallery, New York University, New York City.

University of Guelph, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

"Narrative Two," Cannaviello Gallery, Rome, Italy.

## Books by the Artist

*Picture Fictions*, Anaheim, California, 1971. (Reprinted 1973).

*The Weight of Franchise Meat*, Anaheim, California, 1971.

*A Training in the Arts*, Coach House Press, Toronto, Canada, 1973.

*A Discourse on Domestic Disorder*, Irvine, California, 1975.

## Selected Bibliography

Bourdon, David. "You Can't Tell a Painter by His Colors," *The Village Voice*, vol. 20, no. 12, March 24, 1975, pp. 94-96.

Da Vinci, Mona. "One Man Show at John Gibson Gallery," *Soho Weekly News*, New York, March 20, 1975.

DeAk, Edit. "Robert Cumming at Gibson," *Art in America*, vol. 63, no. 5, September-October 1975, pp. 94-95; ill. p. 94.

Foschi, Patricia. "Robert Cumming's Eccentric Illusions," *Artforum*, vol. 13, no. 10, Summer 1975, pp. 38-39; illus. pp. 38-39.

Foschi, Patricia. "Robert Cumming: Parodist of Logical Systems," *Midwest Art*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 1974.

Helman, Roberta and Marvin Hoshino. "Downtown, Uptown," *The Village Voice*, New York, vol. 20, no. 34, p. 78.

Jochimsen, M. "Story Art," *Magazine Kunst*, Mainz, Germany, February 1974.

Rees, Jeremy. "Public Sculpture," *Studio International*, vol. 184, no. 946, August 1972, pp. 10-15; illus. p. 14.

Rodice, B. "Story Art," *Data*, Milan, Italy, June 1975.

Smith, Howard. "Other Scenes," *The Village Voice*, vol. 16, no. 14, April 8, 1971, p. 34.

Thornton, Gene. "New Focus on an Old Idea," *The New York Times*, September 14, 1975.

Zack, David. "An Authentik and Historikal Discourse on the Phenomenon of Mail Art," *Art in America*, vol. 61, no. 1, January-February 1973, pp. 48-53; ill. p. 50.



